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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000480

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SUBJECT: NEXT STEPS IN TONGA'S POLITICAL REFORM

REF: SUVA 433

Classified By: AMBASSADOR LARRY M. DINGER. SECTIONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

Summary

11. (SBU) Tonga Prime Minister Sevele has responded to the proposals for political reform put forward by the National Committee on Political Reform (ref) with an alternate reform model. The NCPR called for all members of Parliament to be elected, with the PM and all cabinet members to be chosen from among MPs. Sevele's proposal calls for a lower number of elected MPs and allows some non-elected officials to be named cabinet ministers and, consequently, members of Parliament. Government officials we spoke to insist the PM's proposal is consistent with the NCPR framework, but assumes a longer transition period for political reform. Some democracy advocates have a less benign view of the government's proposal, noting it could allow continued political control by the King for the foreseeable future. One group has circulated a petition calling for the PM's resignation. We comment that either proposal would be a major step forward toward democracy in Tonga. End Summary.

A committee to examine the NCPR

12. (U) As noted reftel, the National Committee of the Kingdom of Tonga on Political Reform (NCPR) submitted its report to Parliament October 3. The report recommends an all-elected, 26-member Parliament, with 17 members elected by the general public (up from 9 at present) and 9 members elected by Tonga's 33 nobles (the same as at present). The NCPR proposed that the King select the PM from among the MPs. The PM would in turn select cabinet members, also from among members of Parliament. Upon receiving the report, Tonga's cabinet recommended setting up a tripartite committee to examine the reform proposals. The proposed committee would consist of three peoples' representatives, three nobles' representatives, and three cabinet ministers. The committee is currently awaiting approval by Parliament, which just resumed its session.

PM Sevele puts forward an alternative proposal

13. (U) On October 19 Prime Minister Fred Sevele announced an alternate reform proposal for consideration by the tripartite committee. The Sevele road map for political reform" proposes 14 people's representatives in a 23-28 person Parliament. It allows the King to appoint all 15 members of the cabinet, although it specifies that 2/3 of the appointees should be upon the advice of the Prime Minister. The proposal allows for up to a third of the cabinet to come from outside of Parliament. These additional appointees would automatically become members of Parliament. The King, therefore, could appoint up to five members of Parliament.

The five appointees plus the nine nobles' representatives, traditional supporters of the monarchy, could bring the presumably royalist MPs to 14, equaling the proposed number of peoples' representatives and leaving the balance of power with the King.

Pro-democracy groups disappointed in PM's proposal

¶4. (SBU) Democracy advocates were quick to criticize the Sevele road map. Longtime democracy activist and MP Akilisi Pohiva, who was quietly pleased by the NCPR recommendations, complained in a press release issued November 2 that the PM's report implies that the government "has absolutely rejected the Committee for Political Reform report." "What the PM is doing is literally calling for chaos which we do not want to happen." Akaneti Lauti, the Director of the Friendly Islands Human Rights and Democracy Movement, told visiting Emboffs the Sevele model would leave too much power in the hands of the monarchy. She complained that it "is not fair" for Sevele to circumvent the vetting process of the NCPR. All other models for democratic change, including proposals from Akilisi, fellow People's Representative Clive Edwards and pro-democracy campaigner Laki Niu, were submitted to the NCPR for review and incorporated into the final report. How could the PM submit his model, she asked rhetorically, when the whole discussion process was already completed? Tonga's one female MP, Lepolo Mahe, told Emboff the PM's proposal is "arrogant and disrespectful toward the 90% of the population who support the NCPR recommendation that all MPs be elected." Mahe insisted that if the road map is implemented as is, civil unrest is likely.

¶5. (SBU) An equally strident voice has been that of Ofa Simiki, a businesswoman who represents a group of small

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business owners in Tonga. Simiki is circulating a petition calling for the King to dismiss Sevele as PM. The petition currently has approximately 200 signatures, she told us. Simiki said Tongans are disappointed that the PM did not submit his model during the NCPR's wide-reaching consultations earlier this year. The public perceives the Sevele road map as yet another attempt to retain the status quo and "avoid being directly accountable to the people."

¶6. (SBU) Even among democracy campaigners, however, there is some grudging acceptance that Sevele's reform model is far better than the status quo. Despite her reservations about the PM's proposal, Akaneti Lauti told us it is a step forward in the reform process. Reverend Simote Ve'a, the Chairman of Mrs. Lauti's organization, the Friendly Islands Human Rights and Democracy Movement, told the press the proposal is generally positive, in that it contains "about 60 to 70 percent" of the NCPR recommendations.

Minister of Finance - proposal is an interim step

¶7. (C) Minister of Finance Siosua 'Utoikamanu told visiting Emboffs October 30 that the criticism from peoples' representatives and NGOs shows that PM Sevele needs to explain its reform proposal more clearly. Although the PM hasn't stated it explicitly, it is 'Utoikamanu's understanding that the proposal is an "interim step" toward fulfillment of the goals spelled out in the NCPR report. The PM agrees with the general outlines of the NCPR; however, 'Utoikamanu suggested, a "go slow" approach may be necessary at this time to insure Tonga remains politically and economically stable. The ability to bring in qualified cabinet ministers from outside the small pool of elected representatives is especially important given Tonga's weakened civil service - the result of the early retirements of many skilled civil servants in conjunction with Tonga's economic austerity program.

¶8. (C) Emphasizing that these are his own views, 'Utoikamanu said he believes the proposal is open to

negotiation with Parliament and civil society. Perhaps, remarked 'Utoikamanu, the Sevele reform model is a bit too cautious. "Other countries, some even smaller than ours, have shown they can function well with an all-elected legislature. If the Cook Islands can do it, why can't we?"

Australian High Comm sees enough for everyone

¶9. (C) Australia's High Commissioner to Tonga Colin Hill believes PM Sevele's proposed reform model is measured and reasonable. Echoing 'Utoikamanu's comments, Hill told us he understands the model is interim in nature and will be augmented over time by additional reform steps. Moreover, the new tripartite committee set up to review the NCPR will provide a good mechanism for consultation among the government, Parliament and civil society about the adequacy of the model. The PM's proposal, he concluded, is a good start toward implementing the NCPR recommendations - "there is something in this for everyone." There is no doubt, he said, that the King backs the proposal. Sevele would not go forward with any specific reform model without the King's OK.

Sevele's own view: finding the balance

¶10. (C) PM Sevele acknowledged to us on the margins of the recent Pacific Island Forum (PIF) meetings in Nadi that he is attempting a delicate balancing act: trying to encourage meaningful democratic reform while not panicking Tonga's conservatives who see no need for change. In conversations with the King, Sevele has also received the distinct impression that, while the King has no problem with significant reforms, including the prospect of an all-elected Parliament, the King also prefers instituting reforms by "convention, not legislation." Sevele believes the King and the Nobles must remain players in the Tonga system, even if they no longer dominate. The PM's road map is intended to preserve the elite's roles, at least for the immediate future.

Halapua comfortable with either option

¶11. (C) Sitiveni Halapua, seconded from the East West Center's Pacific Island Development Program to the NCPR and in the end the author of the NCPR report, met with us in Suva recently before heading to the PIF in Nadi. Halapua expressed comfort with PM Sevele's counter proposal for reforms, suggesting both roads would bring considerable democratic progress to Tonga.

Comment

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¶12. (SBU) PM Sevele has long stated that he prefers a gradual, multi-year reform program. His alternate road map indicates his judgment that the NCPR report recommendations were a bit too progressive for Tonga today. But given strong public endorsement of the NCPR process, compromises that move the Sevele model closer to the NCPR's recommendations may be possible in the months ahead. We note that the King's reported preference for reforming by convention rather than legislation can have the advantage of not inflaming conservative passions. On the other hand, "convention" requires a willing monarch, at least until precedents are well-established. King Tupou V appears willing. It is not obvious that his eventual successor -- the Crown Prince, formerly hidebound conservative PM Lavaka'ata -- would happily embrace democratic precedents.

DINGER